

○ REVIEW OF JANE SCHABERG'S *THE RESURRECTION OF MARY MAGDALENE*

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Richard Walsh reviews Jane Schaberg's *The Resurrection of Mary Magdalene: Legends, Apocrypha, and the Christian Testament* (New York/London: Continuum, 2004).



Mary Magdalene has made quite a comeback in recent years, most popularly, in *The Da Vinci Code* and in various, outraged scholarly critiques of that flamboyant novel (soon to be a film). Schaberg also seeks to resurrect Mary Magdalene, but in a fashion more familiar to traditional historical critics and to feminist biblical critics. She aims to ‘produce a feminist reconstruction of the contribution of the historical Mary Magdalene, and an analysis of the uses and suppression of her memory in the Christian Testament’ (p. 206).

The problems facing such an enterprise are so difficult that the ‘resurrection’ of the work’s title is hardly an overstatement. Mary Magdalene appears in relatively few passages in the canonical gospels (however, all of these passages – except for Luke 8:2 – are in the crucial context of the cross, the burial, the empty tomb, and Jesus’ first resurrection appearances [especially, Matt. 28:9-10; John 20:11-18]). Further, these brief notices lie ensconced within androcentric gospels which bury Mary Magdalene beneath the male disciples’ disbelief and the ‘more important’ appearances to the male disciples. Peter ultimately overshadows her in Luke (and Paul), as does the Beloved Disciple in John. Later story-tellers and interpreters submerged her more completely by conflating other gospel passages about unnamed women (particularly, Luke 7:36-50) and about other Marys (particularly, Luke 10:38-42) with the passages about Mary Magdalene. The result is a repentant whore or a quiet contemplative, both of which are domestic figures fully in the service of Jesus and his male successors. Recent fictionalisations depicting her as Jesus’ lover or wife do not change matters. Whether whore, lover, or wife, she serves Jesus, saving him from an asexual or homosexual image (pp. 73, 101-105).

To raise Mary Magdalene from this patriarchal entombment, Schaberg necessarily ventures outside the boundary of traditional historical criticism. She decides, quite creatively, to make Virginia Woolf – and Woolf’s desire to create a ‘Society of Outsiders’ to male privilege (see Woolf’s *Three Guineas*) – the lens through which to resuscitate Mary Magdalene. Specifically, Schaberg decides to imagine a Mary Magdalene after the fashion of Woolf’s similar, imaginative

creation of Judith, Shakespeare's unfortunate sister, buried by the patriarchy (pp. 45-46, 353-354; see Woolf's *A Room Of One's Own*).

Utilising Woolf's feminist vision, Schaberg trespasses on the androcentric field of biblical archaeology in order to create 'a dig of her own' (p. 62) and to begin unearthing her Mary Magdalene. What Schaberg uncovers at Migdal, the legendary home of Mary Magdalene, is the unimportance of women. In contrast to the fervent investigations of nearby sites associated with Peter, Migdal goes undug. In androcentric archaeology, there is no need to praise famous women (p. 60).

Schaberg continues her search by probing beneath the legends that have accreted over Mary Magdalene. Her soundings demonstrate that the gospel Mary Magdalene is not the legendary prostitute, the repentant whore. Interpreters (beginning with Luke?) created those characters, as we have seen, by conflating gospel passages about women. The ultimate reason behind such legendary accretions was a desire to downgrade the prophetic authority of Mary Magdalene and other women. Consequently, Schaberg also wonders whether the possession tradition (Luke 8:2; Mark 16:9) reflects similar sexual politics and whether an anonymous prophetess lies buried under the transition from Mark's anointing prophet (Mark 14:3-9) to Luke's anointing sinner (Luke 7:36-50).

Possession, visions, and eroticism bespeak mysticism, which is precisely where the gnostic and apocryphal materials place Mary Magdalene. There, Mary Magdalene is a prophet or apocalyptic visionary, rather than a prostitute. She is the 'woman who had understood completely' (Dialogue of the Savior 139, 12-13) and the most beloved companion of Jesus (Gospel of Philip 63, 32-64, 9). Even the gnostic Mary Magdalene, however, still lies buried within androcentric language (e.g., Gospel of Thomas 114) and within gender conflicts in these communities. While the gnostic texts are hardly egalitarian, some of them do reflect more powerful roles for women than the canonical texts do, and they evidence as well a concern for human identity beyond the restrictive, social constructs of gender. Thus, in the Gospel of Mary upon which Schaberg relies most heavily, Levi defends a weeping Mary against Peter's misogyny. For Schaberg, if only Levi and Mary Magdalene had switched those roles, the vision of a new human potential would be a clearer textual reality (p. 184).

Schaberg's final dig castigates the androcentric bias in previous discussions of the empty tomb and resurrection appearance traditions. For Schaberg, this bias covers the 'open secret' that the men fled and the women did not and the even deeper desire that the resurrection faith not depend entirely upon the word of a woman (p. 9). Schaberg finds this bias in the scholarly tendency to prioritise the appearance to Peter (following 1 Cor. 15 and Luke) over that to Mary Magdalene (as in Matthew, John, and Mark's appendix) and in the denial that the empty tomb tradition is historical (pp. 221-224). Here, Schaberg's main antagonist is Crossan (pp. 238-253).

Schaberg's own feminist reconstruction reverses the trends. Her early Christianity begins with Mary Magdalene's mystic vision at the empty tomb. To vary the title of her book slightly, the resurrection is Mary Magdalene's visionary experience. Consequently, Mary Magdalene is the successor of Jesus and (possibly) the founder of Christianity. To support these claims, Schaberg posits a source behind the stories of the appearance to Mary Magdalene in Matthew and in John (and behind the gnostic, prophetic Magdalene). That source understood Mary's vision of the risen Jesus as an analogue to Elisha's visionary installation as Elijah's successor in 2 Kings 2. Further, that source also indicates the existence of a Magdalene Christianity, committed to a

new, communal vision of humanity – based on the communal (not Jesus alone) Human One of Dan. 7 and 12 – beyond social constructs of gender. Not surprisingly, given the erasure of women from the ancient records, Schaberg turns to Virginia Woolf (to her *Orlando* and *Waves*) to gesture at this mystic, hopeful vision.

Schaberg's learned style, as well as her familiarity with the ancient texts and with historical scholarship on early Jesus movements and christianities, separates her from fanciful, popular revisionists like Dan Brown. She is and presents herself as a feminist historian, distinguishing herself (clearly) from positivist historians and (a little less clearly) from radical constructivists (p. 299 n247). The result is a rather complicated view of history, one that asserts history's importance, but denies that one can arrive at objectivity, facts, final answers, or final reconstructions (pp. 204, 285, 344). Her history is defiantly a reconstruction in the service of her feminist agenda – the liberation of the oppressed (pp. 15-16, 350). Accordingly, the ultimate justification of her history lies not in its empirical, but in its moral claim. The minimal desideratum of her polemical reconstruction is to increase awareness of the agenda, which she opposes, behind what she calls positivist history, an agenda that is either a deliberate social, political conservatism or a criminal neglect of gender issues.

Schaberg does history in order to gain the audience she desires, the historical-critical academy. Doing history, then, is a rhetorical choice. It is an effort to gain a place therein – a room or a dig of her own. So, as she says, she uses the 'master's tools' to 'dismantle the master's house' (p. 14). She works most vigorously against Crossan, not the least because he once said to her that he would give her the empty tomb (as historical) if he could. Stunned by the fact that he thought he could 'give' it to her, she decided to take it (pp. 252-53). That moment, along with the generative influence of Schüssler-Fiorenza (pp. 7-8), stands behind *The Resurrection of Mary Magdalene*, and Schaberg's historical work is a woman's empowerment of women (p. 259). To that end, although she disavows myths of origins, she will dare to seek – even invent – precedents (p. 252 n203). In this process, as Schaberg's Mary Magdalene is the analogue of Judith Shakespeare, Jane Schaberg becomes the analogue of Virginia Woolf.

While the feminist agenda is paramount, Schaberg does believe in the rhetoric she uses or the game she plays – that is, in history. She believes in the historical women at the empty tomb and in the Gospel of Mary with its vision of a collective human community beyond social constructs of gender. Her appeal for that gospel is so great that one reader (Harvey Klein) thinks that if Magdalene Christianity is not historical, it should be invented (p. 356). Perhaps, with her intriguing, creative use of Virginia Woolf – specifically her notion of outsiders, her Judith, her Orlando, and her notion of communal identity – Schaberg has done just that. She certainly has imagined a Judith Shakespeare Magdalene. To Schaberg's credit (in the game of history she is playing), she admits that she cannot find exactly what she wants, a Mary Magdalene as courageous as Virginia Woolf (p. 353), but Schaberg stands in helpfully here. The resulting disjoint – between her creative use of Woolf and her historical reconstruction – is Schaberg at her best. That gap calls readers to her gospel of the communal Human One far more effectively than her polemical work, however necessary, does.